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ABSTRACT

Research in broadcasting has increased substantially and can be used to aid in a variety of broadcast-related decisions. This paper focuses on audience analysis, an area of knowledge necessary for deciding analysis, an area of knowledge necessary for deciding special-program content, format changes, and aspects of news programming. Topics discussed are methods of data collection, such as ratings and consultants; costs, especially for small-market stations; alternatives to expensive quality research; and suggestions for informal research--community ascertainment, theme contests, suggestion contests, station tours, telephone surveys, and responses requested by announcers and disc jockeys. The paper concludes that, until expenses for sophisticated data analysis decrease, small-market stations should use alternatives in obtaining audience-related information. (JM)

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ALTERNATIVES IN SMALL MARKET RESEARCH

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Alternatives in Small Market Research

Roger D. Wimmer

The history and development of American broadcasting has proceeded in identifiable segments. These segments have followed a pattern similar to the basic communication model: source, message, receiver. From its beginnings, the development of broadcasting has subsequently isolated and concentrated on each of these areas to form what broadcasting is today.

Initially, emphasis was placed on inventing and developing transmission devices (sources), and there was little or no consideration given to what would be broadcast or who would receive the messages. After equipment met fundamental standards and broadcasting emerged, emphasis shifted to programming (messages). At first, anything was broadcast over the air waves. The novelty of broadcasting surpassed the need to consider program content and quality. However, interest quickly turned to what constituted a good program choices. Some programs were successful, others were not. But is was the emphasis on the message that became salient. This emphasis led to the third developmental area.

Broadcasting just any available material soon no longer met the needs and desires of the audience (and advertisers). The emphasis by broadcasters then turned to a consideration of evaluating the types of programs the audience wanted. With this approach developed attempts to define the type of person who made up the audience. It is this third area where broadcasting currently exists: the emphasis is on defining audience composition and programming desires through research.[1]

Broadcast Research

Research has permeated all segments of society. There are relatively few decisions made, products produced, services rendered, or ideas formulated

and developed without some form of research to aid decisions. In fact, to use Weaver's ideas, the term "research" has evolved into a "god" term in the United States. Research is now perceived by some as a savior for all problems. If "research" says so, then it must be true.

To an extent this axiom is accurate. It is true that the volume of research has increased tremendously in the past few decades. It is true that research data have become more important in decision making. It is true that research does help add perspective to a given problem. But it is not true that research can provide all answers: research provides only indications of a specific phenomenon. Qualitative or quantitative research must be interpreted in order to be used. Results prove nothing without valid interpretation. The difference here is important.

Research can be viewed as a panacea for all problems, but in the final analysis, it is only as good as those who plan the study and interpret results. Research can be used effectively, and it can provide excellent indicators about a phenomenon. But it is the purpose of those in charge of a particular research study to insure that results are not misused. Interpretations or causal relationships cannot be suggested without proper information. To do so violates basic scientific inquiry.

This paper concerns broadcast related research. As in other business areas, broadcast research has increased substantially. Yet, rather than a discussion of methodological procedures alone, the purpose of this paper is to present alternatives: research alternatives for the small market broadcaster (or in some cases, broadcasters in middle or large markets depending on specific needs).

The use of audience research in broadcasting, and its increased use, correlates directly with the development of narrowcasting in radio and increased viewership in television. Both narrowcasting and viewership emphasized a need

to identify and understand a certain audience: what they like and dislike, who they are, and how they can be reached effectively. No longer could radio and television programmers air material based solely on a "gut reaction" of what the audience wanted. More information was needed, and more can be obtained.

Broadcast research can be used to help in almost any broadcast related decision. Audience analysis may be used in general programming decisions, format changes, news programming, or special programming preferences. Research can be used to provide indications of audience perceptions of a station's image; sales quotas and trends; or even day-to-day operation. The versatility has made research a valuable tool for broadcasters. Decisions in many areas may be aided by research, but the concentration in this paper is on audience analysis.

Methods of Data Collection

The usual approach to broadcast research or audience ratings is to buy rating books or studies from Nielsen, Arbitron, Pulse, or other organized research companies. These organizations, for the most part, prepare large amounts of data for broadcasters--generally the work contains information relevant to decision making.

Ratings have existed in one form or another for several years. Although complaints have been raised about their applicability and validity, it appears that current research methods for audience ratings will continue for some time. At present, there is no better method for broadcasters who wish to have an idea about the size and composition of their audience.

Another popular way to collect audience information is to hire consultants. There is no limit to the type of consultant that may be hired. In most cases these individuals or companies provide helpful, objective, detailed analyses of broadcast related questions.

Audience data may be collected by using several approaches. In addition,

these data may be analyzed using several different methods. The most common is to compute simple frequencies: 50% of the sample interviewed perceived a station as very entertaining and informative, and so on. Simple frequencies have been, and will continue to be used extensively. However, cross-tabulation, chi-square analyses and other univariate procedures account for a large percentage of broadcast research.[2]

A current trend in broadcast research, as in all other areas of business and education, is multivariate analysis. These procedures expand the types of questions which can be investigated. Multivariate analysis allows for investigations of audience perceptions of a station through factor analysis; relationships of audience needs and desires and station image through canonical correlation; identification of groups in the audience by discriminant analysis, and more. The types of analysis are almost unlimited. Multivariate data analysis has opened a new horizon in research.

Costs

Large surveys, professional research companies or consultants, and the use of multivariate analysis are all predicated on the fact that fair to large amounts of money will have to be invested. Research is generally not cheap, and if computers are used--as is necessary in all types of multivariate analysis--the costs may be relatively high. For stations in major or medium size markets, these costs may not be a financial burden, but for a station in a small market the costs make such exhaustive studies prohibitive. Small stations cannot afford sophisticated research and in many cases do not need such analysis. Therefore, it is not appropriate to expect small stations to get excited about new and unique research methods involving complex methodologies.

Small market stations face three basic problems concerning the use of audience research (and all research in general):

(1) Most stations in small markets do not have access to computers. Even in the case where computers are accessible, costs are often too high for computer time, not to mention the consultant who must be hired to develop and run the program. These factors immediately prohibit the use of multivariate statistics--methods which may be helpful in some markets.

(2) Consultants or research companies involve too great an expense for most small stations. When profit margins are marginal, it is difficult to justify spending thousands or even hundreds of dollars for audience research. The alternative in most cases, then, is not to have any research data at all.

(3) Even if professionals are not hired, or computers are not used, any form of large scale research is prohibitive due to lack of research experience and personnel to perform such tasks. The basic problem is that most small market broadcasters do not know where to begin.

Alternatives

Small market stations are faced with a dilemma. On one hand the need and desire for at least some form of research data is evident; such information aids in almost all types of decisions in broadcasting and adds perspective to those decisions. On the other hand, first-rate, quality research is too expensive for most small market stations. Computer access in many cases is impossible. It is obvious that alternatives must be sought. The era of decision making without some form of objective analysis has disappeared, yet expense and availability of computers should not rule out all research plans.

The problem small market stations face is to devise new methods of audience analysis; methods which involve little or no cost, but will still provide useful information. Three factors enter at this point that must be considered.

(1) It is possible that "home-made" research studies will lack sophistication of those conducted by professional research organizations. In addition,

analyses may well violate basic scientific principles as randomization, validity, reliability, and generalizability. Granted, all research should ideally adhere to basic scientific research tenets, but in view of the need for at least some form of data (and high cost of hiring others), it is possible to violate some rules--if and only if the following point is considered.

(2) No research findings, whether developed from highly sophisticated and formal studies, to "home-made" analyses should be considered as gospel. Research findings in all cases should aid in decision making. They should not be used as the only answer to problems. Informal studies are more apt to violate basic guidelines, yet the informal, or non-professional, techniques are not as poor as they may appear at first glance. Several procedures can be used to compensate for lack of professional help: one is self-study. There is no reason why small market broadcasters cannot learn basic research methodology on their own. Sure, it involves work and time, but at least basic principles can be learned (basic research texts and other sources for research methods are included in Appendix I).

(3) The amount of money invested for research does not necessarily correlate to the quality of data produced. That is, as cost goes up, quality need not follow in proportion. A wealth of information may be collected for little or no cost.

Suggestions

The key to informal research is imagination. Basically, there are no limits to the types of research which can be conducted. The only stumbling blocks are imagination, creativity and persistence. The following section contains six brief suggestions for small market research. Most of these procedures involve little or no expense, but still provide good information.

Community Ascertainment. Although despised by most broadcasters, the FCC

required community ascertainment offers an outstanding, and probably the best, method to receive suggestions about the station's image, programming, news, and so on for no more money than the ascertainment involves. The ascertainment is mandatory; every station, including small markets must complete some form of survey. It makes sense, therefore, to utilize this work to the best advantage.

Rather than rushing through the survey, quickly compiling results, and filing the information in a file drawer to be forgotten, a useful procedure would be to add individualized questions to the community survey. For example, one could ask the person interviewed what he or she likes about your station, what changes could be made in programming, and so on. As long as the survey must be conducted, and as long as the person is available, what harm can be done by asking a few simple questions above and beyond the normal routine? These responses can be listed and tabulated to develop at least some feedback from listerners, and more importantly, those who do not listen. An added benefit is that demographic information will be known to provide indications about how various groups perceive your station's operation.

For the small market station, or any station for that matter, the community ascertainment offers a unique opportunity to receive information and should be used to its fullest potential.

Theme Contest. Another research procedure involving only a small investment is to develop a contest of some sort requiring listeners or viewers to submit 100 or 500 word themes describing what radio or television means in their lives and what they like about good broadcast stations. The answers to these or similar questions are exactly what a broadcaster needs to help formulate decisions.

Community involvement can also be included in this type of contest. A regulation of the contest could be that all submitted themes will be judged by local teachers, community leaders, and station personnel. Awards can be given

to the best themes submitted--either cash or merchandise (trade-out).

Again, this procedure solicits specific audience attitudes about broadcasting in an identified geographic area. If themes are read carefully and considered seriously, several excellent ideas may be extracted and used.

Suggestion Contest. A similar type of contest is to come right out and ask for suggestions from the audience on how to make the station better. The contest might be introduced as follows: "We at station WAAA are always interested in providing the best service for our audience, and we are conducting a contest which invites you to submit suggestions to help us become so great that you can never turn us off. Each day the suggestion judged the most effective will be announced on the air and the person who submitted the suggestion will receive a $10.00 cash award." Or some variation on the idea.

Station Tours. As a public relations gesture, as well as a learning experience for visitors, station tours can be used to obtain suggestions for improvement or change. Whether those touring the station are children, young adults, or older people, a final part of the tour could be asking for suggestions. These could be obtained through either interpersonal discussion or suggestion sheets handed to each person involved in the tour.

Telephone Surveys. Even if a station has a small staff, nothing prevents the possibility of each employee making several phone calls to randomly selected residents in the listening or viewing area. The sample may not be large, but questions can be asked concerning almost any area--programming, news, etc. Before attempting this type of survey, it would be best to consult a few basic research books which discuss survey methods and questionnaire design. This self-study should not eliminate this approach; basic techniques can be learned rather quickly and the information developed from telephone surveys can prove useful.

Announcers. A station's announcers or disk jockeys can contribute significantly to obtaining viewer and listener attitudes. During public appearances, these individuals can ask audience members what they like and dislike about the station. On radio, call in shows, or segments of shows, can be arranged to concentrate solely on audience suggestions for improvement.

All of the above procedures involve relatively small amounts of effort and little or no investment. As mentioned, imagination is the major limitation to what can be done in broadcast research. If results from informal (and formal) research studies are not taken as the only truth, these research procedures may provide a large volume of helpful indications to aid in decision making.

Conclusion

The future of broadcast related research looks promising. Methodological procedures and techniques for data analysis are continually improving. Gradually, procedures used in more sophisticated, expensive studies will become more available to the small market station (after costs decrease). However, until that time, small market stations must search for alternatives to obtain data. Keeping in mind the basic scientific tenets and limited application of results (results are not the only answer), small market stations do have alternatives.

Footnotes

[1]It is possible to argue that broadcasting and broadcast related research have now entered a fourth stage: symbolic orientation. That is, to paraphrase Suzanne Langer, we are now investigating "Broadcasting in a New Key." This concept involves many points but basically suggests that although broadcasting first began with an emphasis on the source, followed by the message and receiver, the development of American broadcasting forced another area of evaluation of the audience. It involves an investigation of what people do with the material presented on television and radio. How do they use the symbols presented?

The media present, in many cases, abstract and ambiguous portrayals of life. Due to the nature of this ambiguity, individuals are allowed to ascribe individual interpretations to programs and information. This creates differences in opinion about programming; to some a show may be too violent, and to others the same show contains no significant amount of violence. This may be a problem with much of the effects research in mass communication: because material is ambiguous, individuals interpret messages in a unique way and therefore one or even a few basic definitions of media effects may not be valid.

This idea is further expanded in another manuscript (Wimmer, R.D. "The Symbolic Nature of Mass Communications in America," Unpublished manuscript, University of Mississippi, 1977).

[2]Wimmer, R.D. and Haynes, R.B. "Statistics: An Analysis of Procedures and Information for Replication," Unpublished manuscript. University of Mississippi, 1977.

Appendix I

Sources of information for basic research methods.

Babbie, E.R. Survey Research Methods (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1973).

Blalock, H.M. Social Statistics (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972).

Keppel, G. Design and Analysis: A Researcher's Handbook (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1973).

Kerlinger, F.N. Foundations of Behavioral Research, 2nd Edition (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973).

Raj, D. The Design of Sample Surveys (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972).

Warwick, D.P. and Lininger, C.A. The Sample Survey: Theory and Practice (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975).